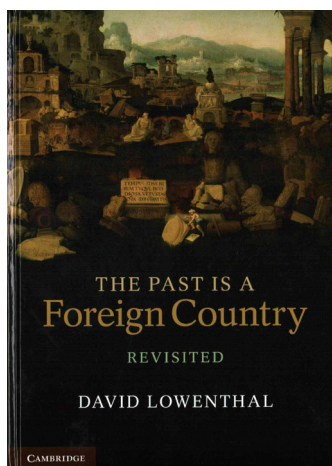


REVIEWS



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The past is a foreign country Revisited

[David Lowenthal]

Cambridge University Press
ISBN: 9780521616850
676 pages

"The past is everywhere", Lowenthal tells us in the introduction to this book (just as he does in its predecessor). This has been my motto since I started doing public archaeology. If I had to choose one book to recommend to anyone interested in really learning what this is all about, then I would surely pick this one. And I guess my review could end here: read it, if you have not done so yet. However, I suppose the reader expects more, so I will try to give more details about the book.

First of all, on the need of a new version: As an editor, I have already approached a number of colleagues with the suggestion that they should revisit their works. Why? Because the 80s, even the 90s, are so far behind, even for books that were so ahead of their time. Lowenthal's first edition of the book in 1985 was consistent with the critical approaches of the moment, yet too provocative for a positivist context that probably felt slapped in the face with it. In this sense, the neopositivist turn of the past few years in Occidental archaeology could also feel the slap of this new version, at least as a reminder about what we are 'playing' with. The past is

not only everywhere, but affects everything, and we have a crucial role in this. However, it is not this underlying idea that makes the new version of the book important. The past has changed in these past thirty years and needed a fresher analysis.

What? Changed? I guess even Lowenthal would slap me now, but let me explain what I mean (as the author does). This book is about a very simple idea: we use the past for present needs and this goes from popular culture to twisted politics and economic interests. In this scenario, contemporary assumptions and perceptions shape the past, and many things have changed since the early 80s. Only the Internet would have been enough to motivate a new edition, but many movements within the heritage world have also given new meanings to old matters, reshaping what we know and understand about the past on a general level. Within its 600 pages, "The Past is a Foreign Country" offers a long range of stories and reflections about the past in the present, and the present in the past, that beyond being erudite and bright let us realize our own encounters with the 'foreign country'.

My only critique might be that the conclusions and examples of the book are shaped by a very Occidental viewpoint that does not even come close to covering the whole picture. However, Lowenthal has already pointed that out, being honest about it and inviting us to reach our own conclusions in our own context. This is probably the main virtue of the book; it helps us open our eyes and challenge our own perceptions. So, the review could continue like this: Once read, apply it to your reality. You will see how it changes.

The original version back in 1985 consisted of three sections with a total of seven chapters. The new version comprises four sections, twelve chapters and an epilogue, maintaining a similar structure but including many new aspects.

The first section, titled "Wanting the Past", contains three chapters. The first two are an extension of the original first. They are devoted to "Nostalgia" and "Time Travelling" focusing on now long-debated issues such as the appeal of the past and the goals and risks of revisiting it. These are issues that still need to be researched, at least from their psychological side. The past can be a dangerous place to go back to, but it attracts us probably because of our discontent with the present. Popular culture has been no

stranger to this idea and many books and movies are based on it. Even knowing we cannot change it, and being still sceptic when it comes to our understanding of time mechanics, the very idea of revisiting even the most recent past is threatening. Adding another reference to the list, "The entire story of you", the third chapter of the acclaimed British TV series "Black Mirror", offers a dystopian frightening story of ourselves with the ability to record and play back our whole lives exactly as they happened thanks to an implant installed in our eyes. As terrifying as it sounds, this technology is most likely to be developed in the near future. This reference takes us to the third chapter of the book and the threats and evils of the past and of revisiting it that can, however, be beneficial and help us reflect on the ways we have been using to promote the value of archaeology and cultural heritage. How we use the past is probably one of the underlying ideas of the book.

The second section, "Disputing the past", consists of another three chapters that expand on the original third and fourth chapters. The dispute between ancient and modern, linked to tradition and innovation, has always been there. Chapter four focuses on that, using the same examples from the original book that swing between aversion and affection (chapters five and six) for the past and the different interactions of this almost paradoxical situation. Once again, there is a psychological component missing from our understanding of such situations that contradict any rule we might try to apply. We do not always have an aversion to aging, and in the same way, we do not always love antiquities. Most of the times, our feelings and attitude depend on our own interest—or indifference—in these ideas, artefacts or places, but also on their value.

"Knowing the Past" is the third section of the book, consisting of what was chapter 5 and three almost new chapters that delve into memory, history and relics. This is probably the most traditional and analytical section of the whole book, where many of the ideas from the previous sections take form into our own—professional—understanding. The division is simple: memory, as in what we recall and forget within our shared cultural habits; history, as in the official events recorded and shared with all the fictitious, alternative and political accounts; and relics, as in the tangible remains of this past that we might remember and value, or not, but are still essential in the formulation of discourses and narratives. Summing up these

ideas in so few words is an impossible task, but the book is worth the time to read as it stimulates us to expand on them and reflect on the many other issues that arise from them.

Finally, the last section of the book, "Remaking the past", offers in its three chapters a brand new ending to the concluding thoughts of the original book. Much more reflected on, it opens the door to many of the current challenges concerning heritage we are facing nowadays, from the Bamiyan Buddhas to Daesh, from World Heritage to people and communities. Why do we preserve? How do we preserve? Although we tend to think conservation methods and techniques bring back the real image of the past, there is a strong political component in the management of material remains and in reconstructions of the past. What we choose to preserve, how we do it and adapt it for contemporary discourses is a daily act, every step we take, whether we are fully aware of it or not. This book's contribution is precisely this; it makes sure we are aware of this. I will reiterate it: Read the book. It is time to start identifying and maybe redefining the different ways we visit the 'foreign country'.

The epilogue is a kind of conclusion to all the ideas explored in the book; twenty pages of final remarks on the omnipresence of the past, however diminished or forgotten, but overall, a call to accept it in its own terms. The past was the past and things were certainly different back then. We cannot understand it from the present, but we keep trying to do it, up until the point where we take responsibility for the acts of others. Is it wrong? The approach we take might be. The last page shows the example of a statue in Pennsylvania State University that was removed because it brought shame to the institution, reminding me of our current debates in Spain about Franco's heritage. Erasing the past is a way to forget, not to cure, and conflicted heritage should remain conflicted. Can we change it? No. Should we forget it? No. Can we change the present image of the past? Was this not what this was all about? However, this is a very controversial option that not even Lowenthal would share. I believe this debate and all the others will remain open.

I opened this review by referencing the first sentence of the book and will close it by referencing the last one, quoting Václav Havel: "Being is and always will be different from what it was before."